Why I believe Myles Standish was born here

The owl and rat crest of the Standishes of Standish. From the former Standish Chapel at Standish Church.

Here and there by George Birtill

CONTROVERSY over the birthplace of Myles Standish is likely to be revived this year, for on August 5th is celebrated the 350th anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower from Southampton, England to Plymouth, Massachusetts.

All efforts to prove that Myles was born in Chorley have failed. The parish register bears no reference to Myles. In 1846, however, there was a great commotion when it was claimed that his name had been erased by pumice stone. This has likewise never been proved and the transcribers who prepared the register for printing in 1910 merely observed that the top of page 39 was torn off and the handwriting not decipherable in other parts. In the preface they also state "some portions of the register have also suffered from mice and damp at a remote period and many pages have presented difficulty to the transcribers".

Since then, infra-red rays have been used with negative results.

The transcribers had no axe to grind. That cannot be said of Mr. I. W. R. Bromley, who made the allegation of defacement. He was the agent for the descendants of Myles Standish who had subscribed for an investigation with claims for Duxbury and other Lancashire estates in view. In any event, whilst page 39 relates to 1585, this is only adduced as the year of Myles Standish's birth from the document of his commission as a lieutenant under Queen Elizabeth I.

Small wonder that the Encyclopedia Britannica observes "The story that the Chorley register was defaced to defeat his title to local lands is proved unfounded".

Quite remarkable arguments have been produced to show that Myles belonged to Duxbury. He was military adviser to the Pilgrim Fathers, but though he attended their services in the colony, he was never a member of their church. This led to the argument that he was a Catholic, but it was quickly pointed out that he fought in the Netherlands on the Protestant side.

Also the commission granted by Elizabeth I contained the undertaking that he would "defend and maintain the reformed church's religion so far as becomes a true and loyal captain, officer or soldier abjuring and without decept denying the pope and all his heretical doctrines and opinions". That apart, would the Pilgrims have allowed a Catholic to attend their services? Surely not.

As Myles was not a separatist or a Catholic, so he must have been Protestant. And the Standishes of Duxbury were Protestant, while those of Standish were Catholic.

This is not very good reasoning since Catholics and non Catholics married freely, even in the latter part of the reign of Elizabeth I.

Moreover, Myles Standish in his will, which started all the furore, refers to his great grandfather of the house of Standish.

COCK VERSUS OWL!

Myles could of course, have been referring to the parent stock, but he would hardly do so in the case of the Standishes of Duxbury. For one thing, Hugh de Standish who got his hands on Duxbury when the rightful lord, Henry de Duxbury was in prison after the Banastre rising in 1315, was supposed to be the son of Robert de Haydock Rector of Standish. Even the heraldry of the two families differed. Although both displayed the three standing dishes argent (silver) on their shield, the background for Standish of Standish was sable (black) and for Standish of Duxbury azure (blue). The crests and mottoes are completely different. Standish of Standish sports 'an owl with a rat in its claws proper' and the motto 'Je desire' and Duxbury 'a cock argent, combed and wattled gules (red)' and the motto 'Constant en tout'.

The only thing that would have settled this battle of the Owl and the Cock so far as Myles Standish is concerned, would have been for him to have borne arms himself. But he didn't, it seems.

The most telling evidence is in the will itself. This states "I give unto my son and heir apparent Alexander Standish, all my lands as heir apparent by lawful descent in Ormskirk, Burscough, Wrightington, Mawdesley, Newburgh, Croston and the Isle of Man and given to me as right heir by lawful descent, but surreptously detained from me by my great grandfather being a second or younger brother from the house of Standish of Standish".

Here is no mention of Duxbury. What is more, the Duxbury Standishes had no important possessions in the places named. Their lands were mainly in Heapey, Bradley, Heath Charnock and Anglezarke.

The cock of the Standishes of Duxbury. From the former Duxbury Chapel at Standish Church.

It is much the same in the case of the Standishes of Standish. Apart from Wrightington, their possessions in the places mentioned in the will are small or non existent. Certainly they had no land in the Isle of Man.

On the other hand, the lands named in the will seem to point to an Ormskirk branch of the Standishes of Standish. This is traced comprehensively by Canon T. C. Porteus in his book "Captain Myles Standish" (University of Manchester Press). He states "Myles Standish was perhaps a grandson of Huan, son of Robert Standish of Ormskirk. He was in all probability the same Huan Standish who held land in the Isle of Man in 1540 and either he or his son may have returned to Lancashire, where, according to Nathaniel Morton, Myles was born."

HOT BLOODED?

The charge that the lands named in the will were wrongly detained, is easily believed, not only because Myles was the man he was, but because of the age in which he lived. It is the worst way to jump to conclusions to judge the past in the context of the present. Morality in the time of Myles Standish, would make the permissive society of today seem monastic. Where property was concerned possession was more than nine tenths of the law.

Canon Porteus says the temperature of the Standishes was 'a little above normal'. They had numerous feuds with their neighbours the Langtrees and the Langtons. "One affray took place in Wigan on Black Monday, 1479, between the Standishes on one side and the Langtons and the Gerards on the other. The latter had to pay monetary compensation to the former for the 'grete offence and hurte' and 'bloody stroke' they suffered".

Richard Standish who later became Rector of Standish, took possession of the Street at Heath Charnock in 1534 on the grounds that Richard Street, who had died, was illegitimate and that he himself had a better claim through his mother. He was persuaded to leave by Sir John Jackson, the priest of Blackrod, and others, who were later summoned by him at Eccleston for trespass.

And so it went on until quite recent times when on the death of Sir Frank Standish in 1812, Thomas Standish a weaver of Blackrod took possession of Duxbury Hall. William Standish Carr (later Standish) succeeded on the will of Frank Hall Standish whom he had previously denounced as not having 'a drop of Standish blood in his veins'. The claims of 1846 provided another sample.

But Myles Standish was different. His whole career is that of a man of honest purpose.

So it is not surprising to find that he never claimed Duxbury or that he belonged to that branch of the family.

Although the reasoning in the note follows closely on the erudite studies of the late Canon T. C. Porteus, it does not come to the same conclusion, possibly because I am unduly swayed by sentiment and certainly recoil from the thought that the birthplace of the military leader of the Pilgrim Fathers may be buried under a colliery waste heap.- G.B.

NAME MYSTERY

Why then did he give the name Duxbury to his settlement in Plymouth Colony? Canon Porteus points out that the Standishes of Peel or Park did not own the whole of Duxbury. There was another house in the township called Duxbury Hall held by a family of the surname Duxbury. In 1524 it was sold by Alexander Duxbury to Ralph Standish of Standish, who used it as a dower house.

For my own part, I have never regarded Peel and Park as the same. A 'peel' is a fortified place and the only site in Duxbury that answers this description is at Bretters, where the moat still remains. It stands on a slope which commands a view of the country to Anglezarke and of the Vale of Yarrow from Limbrick to the railway.

If we sweep away the trunk road, the railway and the canal, as we must to take a look at Myles Standish's time, the fortress must also have had sight of Yarrow Bridge. In any case, the track which is now part of the walk from Three Steps to Long Lane, was once a principal road, linking the old Roman road through what is now Duxbury Park, with the one that ran from Blackrod over the Nab to Heapey.

So much for the Peel. What of the Park?

The word today conjures up pictures of wooded fields and sweeping drives, but in the middle ages it denoted land where game could be taken. There was a Park at Charnock Richard which gives its name to the hall. Another such park was Healey.

RIVAL HALLS

So far as Duxbury is concerned, the western tip between the Eller Brook and the Yarrow best answers this description, particularly if it can be visualised without the colliery buildings and spoil heap.

There is still some lovely scenery left, as those who use Grundy's Lane know full well. The place where the Eller and the Yarrow meet is something to conjure with. Certainly if Myles Standish saw it, he would not forget it. Oddly enough it is still populated by game.

If this is the Park, where was the rival hall to the Peel? It has been suggested that this was at New Barn, the part of the township bordering Adlington and bounded by the Eller Brook and the Yarrow.

But I think the area would be too extensive, especially if it was bounded by the old main road which bisected the present Duxbury Park to come out at Rawlinson Lane. This would mean that the Park would include the site of Duxbury Hall itself with its old barns and perhaps its mill.

Thus whilst the Standishes of Duxbury occupied the Peel at Bretters, the Standishes of Standish occupied Duxbury Hall itself. It could have been the other way round, but I doubt it.

The lands of the Standishes of the Peel were mostly to the east, as already pointed out. There does not seem much doubt that they built the elegant hall which has been rebuilt at the top of the hill and is now Hall o' th' Hill. That was before they eventually took possession of the Park at a later date.

Besides, they were really interlopers in Duxbury. Their attempt to acquire the whole manor was disputed.

Perhaps after all the Duxbury's held on to the Manor Hall with its mill (an integral part of a manor) and the park.

If that were so, then Myles could certainly have visited Duxbury Park after his relatives from Standish had taken it over. Perhaps he went to see an old aunt. Perhaps his mother went there for the confinement, not wishing to make the sea crossing to the Isle of Man. I incline to that belief.

A man, when he is getting older, particularly if he is far from his native land, thinks of his birth place with affection. And Myles Standish was that sort of man.

Over the centuries loud and clear I hear his voice saying "That's why I call my home over here -Duxbury. It was the place of my birth".

That's why I hope the pilgrims when they return, will not forget to visit Duxbury.

Chorley. Eng.